Caste System

The term "castes" is used to describe the complex system of social divisions that pervades life in [India](http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fworldgeography.abc-clio.com%2FSearch%2FDisplay%2F1004357%3Fterms%3Dindia%2520caste%2520system%26webSiteCode%3DSLN_WGEO%26returnToPage%3D%252fSearch%252fDisplay%252f1004357%253fterms%253dindia%2Bcaste%2Bsystem%26token%3DF0434B56CFBD9F34FCFC512318E7B495%26casError%3DFalse%23&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNGf1iu0xv9bUWXHpef6lAI_Xmictw). Caste is an ancient hereditary system that developed alongside and became intertwined with [Hinduism](http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fworldgeography.abc-clio.com%2FSearch%2FDisplay%2F1004357%3Fterms%3Dindia%2520caste%2520system%26webSiteCode%3DSLN_WGEO%26returnToPage%3D%252fSearch%252fDisplay%252f1004357%253fterms%253dindia%2Bcaste%2Bsystem%26token%3DF0434B56CFBD9F34FCFC512318E7B495%26casError%3DFalse%23&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNGf1iu0xv9bUWXHpef6lAI_Xmictw). Caste determines whom a person can marry, specifies what kind of work he can do, and even controls what he can eat or touch. Since the great majority of Indians are Hindu, the caste system has played an enormous role in the history of India, and it continues to exert tremendous influence on modern Indian culture and politics.

"Caste" is not an Indian word; it comes from the Portuguese word *casta,* which means "lineage" or "race." It was first used by Portuguese colonists in the 16th century to describe the unfamiliar social system they encountered among the Indian people. Later [English](http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fworldgeography.abc-clio.com%2FSearch%2FDisplay%2F1004357%3Fterms%3Dindia%2520caste%2520system%26webSiteCode%3DSLN_WGEO%26returnToPage%3D%252fSearch%252fDisplay%252f1004357%253fterms%253dindia%2Bcaste%2Bsystem%26token%3DF0434B56CFBD9F34FCFC512318E7B495%26casError%3DFalse%23&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNGf1iu0xv9bUWXHpef6lAI_Xmictw) colonists adopted the term from the Portuguese. The English use of "caste" encompasses two separate but related concepts in Indian culture: *varna* and *jati.* The combination of *varna* and *jati* created a rigid system that resulted in extraordinary cultural stability in India over thousands of years, but which has also stifled social mobility.

All Hindus are divided among four *varna* and a fifth group, known as the [untouchables](http://worldgeography.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1004357?terms=india%20caste%20system&webSiteCode=SLN_WGEO&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f1004357%3fterms%3dindia+caste+system&token=F0434B56CFBD9F34FCFC512318E7B495&casError=False#). The four *varnas* are: the Brahmans, the traditional priest class; the Kshatriya, the warrior class; the Vaishya, the workers; and the Sudra, whose role is to serve the three higher classes. Below the Sudra are the untouchables, who are supposedly unclean from birth and are therefore assigned jobs that would "pollute" the higher classes. These include working with dead animals or cleaning sewage. (To promote social equality, [Mohandas Gandhi](http://worldgeography.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1004357?terms=india%20caste%20system&webSiteCode=SLN_WGEO&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f1004357%3fterms%3dindia+caste+system&token=F0434B56CFBD9F34FCFC512318E7B495&casError=False#), the 20th century Indian nationalist leader, renamed the untouchable caste the Harijans, "children of God." The term "untouchable" is still commonly used, however).

Each of the *varnas* are divided into hundreds or thousands of *jati,* literally meaning "birth." The *jati* are kinship groups with hereditary roles and professions within society. Hindus will traditionally marry only within their own *jati.* As Indian civilization developed over the last 3,000 years, economic and technological advances allowed for the creation of more specialized jobs. It is likely that the *jati* system became continually more finely divided over the centuries, resulting in the very specific kinship groups observed in modern times.

The origins of the caste system are obscure. The system predates recorded history in India, and the limited archaeological and literary resources available provide only suggestions about how the system developed. The most widely accepted theory is that the most basic elements of the Hindu caste system—the *varna—*developed in the period 1500-1000 B.C. as a result of the [Aryan conquest of India](http://worldgeography.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1004357?terms=india%20caste%20system&webSiteCode=SLN_WGEO&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f1004357%3fterms%3dindia+caste+system&token=F0434B56CFBD9F34FCFC512318E7B495&casError=False#). Prior to that time, India was inhabited by a people known as the Dravidians, who built cities and who appear from the archaeological record to have been fairly advanced for the time. The [Aryans](http://worldgeography.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1004357?terms=india%20caste%20system&webSiteCode=SLN_WGEO&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f1004357%3fterms%3dindia+caste+system&token=F0434B56CFBD9F34FCFC512318E7B495&casError=False#) probably came from Central Asia, and they spoke an Indo-European language that was written down in such [Sanskrit](http://worldgeography.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1004357?terms=india%20caste%20system&webSiteCode=SLN_WGEO&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f1004357%3fterms%3dindia+caste+system&token=F0434B56CFBD9F34FCFC512318E7B495&casError=False#) texts as the[*Rigveda*](http://worldgeography.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1004357?terms=india%20caste%20system&webSiteCode=SLN_WGEO&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f1004357%3fterms%3dindia+caste+system&token=F0434B56CFBD9F34FCFC512318E7B495&casError=False#); related speakers of Indo-European languages were settling in many areas of [Europe](http://worldgeography.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1004357?terms=india%20caste%20system&webSiteCode=SLN_WGEO&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f1004357%3fterms%3dindia+caste+system&token=F0434B56CFBD9F34FCFC512318E7B495&casError=False#) at about that same time.

The Aryans conquered the Indian subcontinent gradually over a period of centuries. It is thought that they divided themselves into the three highest *varnas—*the division of priests (roughly equivalent to Brahmans), warrior kings (Kshatriya), and commoners (Vaishya) seen in other Indo-European cultures. Further speculation has the conquered Dravidian population placed into the servant Sudra caste by the ruling castes. *Varna* literally means "color," and it has been suggested that the lighter-skinned Aryans used the caste system to maintain their superiority over the darker-skinned Dravidians. (Brahmins are traditionally associated with the color white, Kshatriya with red, Vaishya with yellow, and Sudra with black.)

The untouchables are thought to have been added to the system as newly conquered tribal groups were added to Hindu society at the lowest rungs. Another explanation is that they developed in response to the religious needs of the higher castes as Hindu religious practices became more restrictive. Strict religious interpretation dictates that members of the higher castes avoid contact with many aspects of daily life, like dead animals, human waste, or menstrual blood. The untouchable caste may have been created out of the Sudra caste in order to provide workers who could take care of these "polluting" aspects of life. At some point, this concept of ritual pollution extended to the workers themselves, so they were literally "untouchable." Strict Brahmans, for example, will avoid touching anything that has come in contact with a member of the Chamar *jati,* the untouchable group responsible for dealing with dead animals.

Linguistic and archaeological evidence suggests that the system of *varnas* emerged at the time of the Aryan conquest; determining the origins of the *jati* system is more difficult. No comparable systems of rigid social division emerged in the other regions invaded by Indo-European people, so most historians think elements of the *jati* system existed prior to the Aryan invasion. A preexisting system of hereditary professions and kinship groups probably became incorporated into the *varna* system of classes, and both systems of social division probably grew alongside Hinduism in a way that reinforced both the religion and the caste system.

There are also mythological explanations given for the development of the caste system in Hindu sacred texts and folklore. One explanation given in the *Rigveda* (ca. 1200-900 B.C.) describes a family that was supposedly descended from Brahma, the mythical forefather of Hinduism. Within that family, the father served as teacher and priest (Brahman), the son served as warrior and protector (Kshatrya), and the sister took care of the household duties (Vaishya). The text suggests that those roles continued over a series of generations and eventually developed into the *varna* system.

Another mythological explanation comes from a story about a man named Mahanuvu who saved humanity from a worldwide flood by taking refuge in a great ship. The story is strikingly similar to the story of Noah in the Bible. After the flood, Mahanuvu and his followers divided humankind into the four castes.

A third mythological explanation comes from the *Bhagavadgita,* which was composed sometime after the *Rigveda.* In this account, the Brahmans come from the head of the god Brahma; the Kshatrya come from his arms; the Vaishya derive from his legs (or belly); and the Sudra come from Brahma's feet. The text includes the words, "The four castes were created by Me according to differences in aptitudes and actions of Men. Though I am its creator, know Me to be incapable of action or change." Hindu scholars have speculated that the *jati* system subsequently developed out of the *varna* through differences in men's aptitude and actions. This story about the division of Brahma into the four castes of humankind is the most frequently cited of the mythological explanations for the caste system.

The actual implementation of the caste system in daily life varied widely over time and from place to place. Historical sources tell little about how the system functioned in Indian village life prior to 1500, but examples from modern villages suggest a great deal of variety in interactions and practices between and within castes. Indian politics—which is well documented—has been dominated throughout Indian history by the Brahmans and Kshatryas, both of whom assumed the dominant role at different times. Some historians speculate that the caste system became more rigid after 1500, as the capacity for long-distance communication allowed for a wider distribution of concepts about how caste laws should be applied.

The caste system in India is inextricably linked to the beliefs of Hindu religion. One of the tenets of Hinduism is reincarnation—the belief in the rebirth of a person's soul into another life form after death. The life a person is reincarnated into is determined by his or her [karma](http://worldgeography.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1004357?terms=india%20caste%20system&webSiteCode=SLN_WGEO&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f1004357%3fterms%3dindia+caste+system&token=F0434B56CFBD9F34FCFC512318E7B495&casError=False#); a person with good karma may be reborn as a higher caste human, while a person with bad karma might be reborn as a lower caste human. Hinduism teaches that since a person's fate is determined by his past life, his fate is justified. A good Hindu, therefore, accepts his position in life; by accepting his position willingly, he can improve his karma and thereby hope for a better incarnation in the next life.

The social implication of this belief system has been a remarkable stability—or rigidity—in Indian culture. Since being a good Hindu means accepting one's position in life, Hindus have been reluctant to challenge restrictions imposed on them by the caste system. The system has kept a large part of the Indian population in a condition of servitude, since the Sudras and Untouchables have been reluctant to challenge their positions. The higher castes have not questioned the system because they benefit from it and because, according to their beliefs, the lower castes deserve their status because of actions in past lives.

Challenges to the caste system in India have primarily come from the influence of non-Hindu faiths. [Islam](http://worldgeography.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1004357?terms=india%20caste%20system&webSiteCode=SLN_WGEO&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f1004357%3fterms%3dindia+caste+system&token=F0434B56CFBD9F34FCFC512318E7B495&casError=False#), Christianity, and [Jainism](http://worldgeography.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1004357?terms=india%20caste%20system&webSiteCode=SLN_WGEO&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f1004357%3fterms%3dindia+caste+system&token=F0434B56CFBD9F34FCFC512318E7B495&casError=False#) all espouse a more egalitarian message that runs counter to caste practices. Of those faiths, Islam has been the most significant, as it has held a large number of adherents in India for well over a thousand years. Some lower-caste Indians have elevated their social status by converting to these non-Hindu faiths, although this has generally meant separation from their traditional family groups. The majority of Indians have remained within the Hindu faith, and the caste system has continued to exert a profound influence on their lives.

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##### **Further Reading**

Baker, Sophie, *Caste: At Home in Hindu India,* 1990; Robb, Peter, *A History of India,* 2002; Wolpert, Stanley A., *A New History of India,* 2000.